

THE SHIMMER AT BLACKWOOD

The old house beside Blackwood Forest was my grandfather's. I moved in looking for quiet, for space to write. Instead, I found something else entirely.

Thomas Lore

Thomas Lore is a character created by Tomasz Kucza.
The events chronicled in this book, while unsettling, are a work of fiction.

The stories take place in the same universe as **Aether Collector**,
an adventure game set in a similar corner of the unexplained.

You can find it on **Steam** and soon along with
my other works on **magory.itch.io**.



AUTUMN

I thought I knew every bend, every shadow, every sound Blackwood could make. But last autumn, things changed. The changes were subtle at first. A strange quality to the light between the trees, colors that seemed to shift when you weren't quite looking at them. Then came the incidents. The missing hikers. The unexplained sounds. The things people would only whisper about over coffee at Mason's Diner.

I started collecting their accounts - stories of things that shouldn't be possible. This book contains what I learned, both from others and from my own experiences. I didn't realize then that I was documenting something far stranger than local folklore. Or that my own family's history was somehow tied to whatever was happening in these woods.



THE REFLECTION

After the October rains, the forest paths were dotted with puddles. The surfaces of these puddles, however, were oddly still, even in the strong wind, and the reflections they held did not quite match what they were supposed to mirror.

I first heard about it from Martha, who walks the forest trail every morning. She said she'd noticed how the clouds in the puddles moved in the wrong direction, and sometimes you'd see leaves falling in them before they actually fell from the trees. She'd started to avoid them, especially since that morning when she saw a woman she didn't recognize, her reflection replacing her own.

More people started seeing things in the still water. Peter, who works the evening shift at the gas station and likes to wander the forest after work, confided that he'd seen a woman in a worn, old-fashioned blue dress in one of the puddles. Then, young Emily, who delivers mail, mentioned seeing the same woman in the water when she was delivering mail to old Andrew, her face urgent and pleading, but no sound ever came through. "It's as if she was trying to tell me something important," Emily blabbered later to everyone who would listen.

I only saw her once. It was near the creek—the water was black as pitch and still as glass. At first it was only a flash of blue in the corner of my eye, but when I looked closer at the reflection, there she was—the woman in the blue dress. She looked up at me and mouthed some words, but her lips moved without a sound, her face pale. A gentle smile crossed her face, as if she'd finally found what she was looking for. I looked around, hearing a rustle, but when I looked into the puddle again, she was gone.

Rumor has it that old Bernard, who works at the superstore, tried to grab her and his hand got caught inside the puddle; he couldn't remove it. They had to call an ambulance and they amputated his arm on the spot, not able to remove it from the puddle. But he says he lost it due to an infection, so who knows?



THE CIRCLE

The circle kept appearing near the old logging trail, always in the same spot. From a distance, it looked almost ordinary - autumn leaves caught in an eddy of wind. But there was something wrong about its movement, too precise, too controlled. The leaves would spin endlessly without dispersing, creating perfect geometric patterns in the air.

Parents started complaining when their children couldn't stay away from the anomaly. "It's like it's calling to them," Mrs. Henderson told me, her hands trembling around her coffee cup. I watched it myself one gray afternoon - the neighborhood kids circling it at a distance, like moths around a flame. Then came that Thursday in late October, when twelve-year-old Tommy Blake was there with his friends as the spinning suddenly ceased.

The leaves dropped in an unnaturally perfect circle, and the air grew thick, almost syrupy. Tommy developed symptoms that evening - not quite a fever, more like his vitality was draining away. His mother described it as "like someone had pulled a plug inside him." He recovered after three weeks, but something had changed. He wouldn't go near the forest anymore, and his drawings at school became strange - precise geometric patterns that matched the circle's formations.

The dead leaves remained in their perfect circle for months, untouched by wind or rain. Even now, nothing grows in that spot.



THE LISTENING CAPS

William Barrett, the retired mycologist living on Cedar Lane, called me early one morning, his voice tense with excitement. He'd found something he couldn't classify - clusters of nearly transparent mushrooms growing at the bases of the oldest oaks, each cap no larger than a fingernail.

"They respond to sound," he told me. "They pulse, almost like they're listening."

I met him at the forest edge that afternoon. The fungi were beautiful - delicate things that seemed to capture and amplify what little winter light filtered through the branches. When we spoke, they would pulse ever so lightly, like tiny beating hearts.

William became obsessed with them. "These aren't like anything we've seen before," he told me, showing me his detailed sketches. "The cellular structure... it's all wrong. I'm starting to think they might even be edible, despite their bioluminescence. I have to know."

Two weeks later, hikers reported seeing lights through his windows at night, a soft, pulsing glow. When the police conducted a welfare check, they found him in his study. Neighbors reported that when they rolled him out to the ambulance, his skin was luminescent. The authorities quarantined the area. Hazmat teams worked through the night, and later the house had been demolished. The official story blamed toxic mold, but no one mentions how the ground there still thrums on quiet nights, or how the remaining foundation stones sometimes flicker with an inner light, especially when someone speaks nearby.


POLICE



THE SLOW

There's a place on Widow Creek where the branches twist together, forming a perfect arch above the water. Locals call it the Devil's Doorway, though you won't find it on any map. The air near the arch shimmers, even on the coldest days, like heat waves rising from summer asphalt.

Two experienced hikers went missing there last October - Mike Satter and David Morris, both born and raised in these woods. They found Satter a week later, twenty miles away, severely dehydrated and confused. He spoke about the creek's air becoming thick, viscous, how everything moved as if suspended in water. He described leaves falling in slow motion, like feathers in a dream, crumbling to dust at his touch. "Time felt wrong there," he told me from his hospital bed. "Like I was walking through someone else's memory of the place."

Satter never set foot in Blackwood again. Sold his house, moved to Arizona. Morris was never found. Some say he went too far through whatever threshold exists there, that the doorway closed behind him.

I've been to the arch, once. The air grew thick as I approached, each breath a struggle, like I was drowning on dry land. The branches overhead were twisting together in a strange way, sunlight scattering into a thousand tiny rainbows that never quite faded. I took a few pictures, but I did not dare to step beneath the arch itself.

And now nobody goes near that place anymore. Not since they found Morris's backpack half-buried under an ancient oak, the fabric crumbling at the touch, as if it had been slowly decomposing for centuries.

THE FRACTAL HOUSE

Old Andrew lived in that brick house since before I moved here. People say he started noticing something odd about his walls last winter - patterns that shouldn't be there, angles that seemed to repeat endlessly. Most thought it was just his drinking, but even the postal workers and delivery folks started talking. The bricks would shift when you weren't looking directly at them, creating impossible geometries.

The changes spread slowly. First the walls, then the windows began to duplicate themselves in smaller and smaller versions, like endless reflections in opposing mirrors. Mrs. Jones from the grocery store stopped delivering there after she noticed the porch steps had twisted into impossible angles between her visits, making them treacherous to climb. Each time someone visited, the house had subtly rearranged itself - a window higher than before, the door slightly askew, the roof angles just wrong enough to make you doubt your own memory. Andrew grew quieter as the house changed. Some days he'd sit on his porch, staring at the walls for hours. Local gossip said his features were starting to blur, like a photograph slightly out of focus.
By fall, the distortions had become so severe that looking at the house for too long would give you a headache. Then one morning, it just... stopped. The house looked normal again, but different somehow - red brick instead of brown, the porch on the opposite side, the chimney a completely different shape.

And Andrew? Well, the man who lives there now goes by the same name, has the same paperwork, same memories according to him - but he's taller, thinner, with sharp cheekbones instead of Andrew's round face, and dark hair where Andrew's had been gray. Nobody talks about it much anymore. Some say the house is still changing, just too slowly for us to notice, and this new Andrew is still transforming too, becoming someone else entirely, one imperceptible shift at a time.





THE RED TOWER

Deep in Blackwood, behind the Miller’s farm, there is an old furnace the local highschool kids dubbed the Wishing Tower. The story went that if you left something precious in its mouth, it would grant your wish.

Most adults dismissed it as childish nonsense, but the kids believed it worked. When they started leaving small offerings - coins and treasured toys - their wishes appeared granted: they got new backpacks, colorful pens, shiny shoes - all simple things that could have been coincidences. Then Lee Anderson, frustrated that his desperate wish for a dog hadn’t worked, left a dead squirrel he found in the forest. The next morning, a massive stray with dark, matted fur and wild eyes appeared, following Lee everywhere, snarling viciously at anyone who dared come close.

Word spread through the school in whispers, and children began leaving darker offerings - dead mice, fallen birds, broken dolls. The tower seemed to favor these morbid gifts, but its grants were twisted reflections of what was wished for. A girl who wanted to be noticed developed a strange, silvery birthmark. A boy who wished his brother would stop pestering him woke up to find his brother in intensive care after a bike accident.

After Lee’s dog savagely mauled his little sister and had to be put down, parents finally got involved and strictly forbidden their children from approaching the tower. But some still went, more secretly now, drawn by its dark promises. The Clark twins were last seen heading into Blackwood at dusk, carrying a box with a trapped stray cat and a butcher’s knife. They never returned, their bikes found abandoned at the forest's edge.

No one goes near the tower anymore. It still stands there, all dark and silent, but on some nights, when the wind blows in a certain direction, you can hear a faint, rustling sound coming from below. And if you listen carefully, beneath the rustling, you can hear something like a sigh, a satisfied sound… and then silence once more.



THE WOODEN RIDER

The motorcycle sits half-submerged in Jensen's Bog, just off the hiking trail. At first glance, it looks like an art installation - a perfect wooden replica of a modern Triumph, complete with detailed spokes and chain. But look closer, and you'll see thick roots growing from its wheels into the dark water, anchoring it firmly in place.

The local arts community insisted they knew nothing about it when it appeared that September. Mrs. Jensen swears it showed up overnight, right after the harvest festival. Some say it was a real motorcycle that got stuck there, somehow transformed by whatever's happening in these woods. The roots spreading from it certainly look real enough - and last month, small leaves started sprouting from its handlebars.

I ran into Sarah Miller at Mason's Diner one morning, hands shaking as she told me about her brother Danny. He'd come home pale and terrified after wandering near the bog. He'd found something else out there, he said - a figure made of the same wood, frozen in a silent scream. Sarah told me Danny was always making things up, and no one else ever saw this figure. But I noticed how all the local kids started taking the long way around that section after his story spread. Some say on quiet mornings, the old headlamp flickers and you can hear an engine trying to turn over, as if somewhere deep in that wooden frame, a motorcycle still lives.



WINTER

The first snowfall of the year came late, but with a force that seemed intent on erasing all color from the world. White blankets covered the familiar paths of Blackwood, silencing the rustle of leaves and the babbling of the creek. It was in this monochrome landscape, during one of my deeper ventures into the woods, that I saw it – a black dot, hanging in the air, impossibly still. Not a bird, or a knot on a branch, but a void, like a hole torn in the fabric of the winter sky, nestled deep within the trees where even the faintest light struggles to penetrate.

It was small, just a speck at first, barely noticeable against the stark white backdrop, hovering between the trees. I remember thinking it might just be a trick of my own eyes, the way the eye plays games in the forest's gloom. But it was always there, unwavering, a constant point of darkness in the muted white, even as I circled around it.

Now, I should clarify – no one else saw that black dot. It remained my own strange, solitary discovery. But it was then, I think, that the whispers about the Shimmer began to change. They were no longer just stories told by the fire, the tall tales of old men at Mason’s Diner. They became something more urgent, a chorus of hushed voices sharing new fears, and strange occurrences. The missing hikers, the pulsing lights, the rumors of glass animals, all started to coalesce and form a different picture; of something undeniably wrong in Blackwood. It was no longer just isolated incidents, but a shared, mounting sense that the strange happenings were not just possibilities, but an ever-growing reality. It seemed like the woods themselves were watching, listening… and changing.



THE GLASS HERD

It started after the first snow - reports of strange deer in the forest. They looked almost normal from a distance, but closer up you could see through them, like they were made of foggy glass or ice. Park rangers dismissed them as tricks of winter light at first, until more sightings came in. A translucent wild boar rooting through fallen leaves. A see-through fox crossing the hiking trail at dusk.

Karl Larsson was the first to shoot one. He'd been hunting these woods for forty years, but his hands still shook when he told me what happened. The deer had looked solid enough through his scope, he said, until the bullet hit. Instead of blood, there was a sound like breaking ice. The creature shattered into five or six glistening pieces, each one moving independently like mercury. He watched, frozen in place, as they slithered into the snow and disappeared into the frozen ground.

Later hikers reported seeing translucent people standing motionless between the trees. Like the animals, they seemed to be made of clouded glass, their mouths moving in silent speech. Two days later, they found Martin Webb's body by the old deer trail. The hunter was desiccated, his skin paper-thin and brittle like autumn leaves, as if every drop of moisture had been drawn from his body. The snow around him had melted in a perfect circle, leaving bare, frozen ground.





THE RING

The circle appeared in January, floating between two old maples at the edge of Blackwood where the forest meets the elementary school grounds. A perfect ring of shimmering colors hanging about twenty feet in the air, like a soap bubble that refused to pop. Teachers called it a weather phenomenon, but when Annie Liu threw her red hair ribbon through it, the ribbon hung suspended inside the ring, slowly rotating like a leaf caught in an eddy.

More items followed - paper planes, tennis balls, even someone's lunch box. Each object would float there for hours, spinning lazily in that impossible space, before vanishing at sunset. The children made a game of it, keeping count of their lost treasures. Parents started complaining about missing toys and school supplies, but the game continued.

Then Jamie Fisher found the pile. Deep in the woods, miles from the floating ring, hundreds of objects lay heaped against an old oak tree - Annie's ribbon, paper planes, tennis balls, all covered in decades of dirt and decay. Things that had only gone missing weeks ago looked like they'd been abandoned there for years. That same evening, Sarah Mills' younger brother, Noah, couldn't resist the allure of the ring. He grabbed a long stick and reached up, trying to touch the shimmering surface. The stick went through, but the rainbow light poured down the wood like liquid fire, reaching for his hands.

Noah yelped and dropped the stick, but it was too late. His fingers were stained with colors that shouldn't exist, shimmering and shifting like the ring itself. The other children gathered around, their eyes wide with a mix of fear and fascination. Noah's fingers didn't hurt, but they pulsed with an otherworldly light that made everyone uneasy.

The children stopped playing the game, and the teachers kept a wary distance from the circle. Noah's fingers never returned to normal.



THE WATCHERS

The Henderson boy was the first to see them in town - three figures made of clouded glass, standing motionless by the playground swing set. They looked like people, he said, but somehow wrong, their edges too soft, their movements too fluid. When they beckoned to him, their gestures were jerky, like broken puppets trying to move underwater.

He shouldn't have gotten closer, but children are curious. One of the figures burst apart into glistening pieces and caught his legs, trying to pull him into the frozen earth with them. He managed to kick free, but his shoes melted, leaving him barefoot in the snow.

Now he sees them sometimes, standing outside his bedroom window on cold nights. Three transparent faces looking up from the lawn, their mouths moving in silent patterns.

As the winter deepened, the sightings became more frequent. The Watchers were seen in the forest, by the creek, even in the heart of town. Their silent, urgent presence became a part of daily life, a constant reminder of the Shimmer. The townsfolk learned to live with the Watchers, but they could never get over the chill that seemed to follow them, or the silent pleas that echoed in the cold night air, when they were close.



THE PILE

They said it was Billy Hartley and his gang of bullies who decided to throw little Henry Davis into the rainbow ring. The one that made things hover and disappear. Henry was an orphan living with his aunt, in third grade, and they targeted him ever since he started streaking his hair green.

One cold afternoon, Billy and his cronies cornered Henry by the old maples. With a ladder stolen from the school's maintenance shed, they dragged him up and pushed him into the shimmering circle. The bullies laughed as Henry hung suspended, his body rotating slowly like the other objects before him. They eventually got bored and left him there, but Henry's friends tried desperately to get him down. Despite their efforts, at sunset, Henry disappeared.

He was found the next morning, lying on the pile where all the objects thrown into the ring reappeared. But Henry was changed. His clothes were in tatters, his skin marked with strange scratches, and his eyes were glassy and distant. When asked what happened, Henry would only whisper about wandering in a different forest, one where the trees were made of glass and the sky was a kaleidoscope of colors that shouldn't exist. He said he walked for days until he found another ring, one that brought him back.

That night, the ring disappeared, leaving only a perfect circle of dead grass in the snow.



THE SWEET ROT

It began with the sprouts. Tiny, almost iridescent green shoots that emerged from the thawing earth, pushing their way through the dead leaves and damp soil. They seemed to draw warmth, sprouting quickly into vines that bore large, circular, violet grapes. These grapes weren't like anything seen before – they were plump, almost translucent, with a waxy sheen, and their sweetness was intoxicating. People found themselves drawn to them, gorging on the grapes, an addictive rush following each bite.



Families would gather for midnight feasts, their children's faces stained purple. The grapes, they said, took the edge off the winter, filled them with warmth, made them feel good. But as the weeks passed, painful, swollen boils started appearing on people's skin – at the base of the neck, the tips of their fingers, under their fingernails, then on their cheeks and hands. These weren't just harmless spots; they were pulsing, growing larger each day until they burst, releasing small, iridescent insects with translucent wings that immediately dove into the soil, where new sprouts emerged days later.

Most people stopped consuming the grapes, horrified by the effects. However, Bernard from the superstore, became even more obsessed. He claimed the more grapes he ate, the more clear his mind was becoming.

Eventually, Bernard was no longer seen wandering the town or working at the superstore. He became a recluse, hidden away in his home. When the authorities, finally entered his home, they were met with a cloying, sweet fragrance that made their heads spin. One of the officers told a hushed story at Mason's Diner later that day - that when they entered the building, they found it filled with a thick cloud of iridescent flying creatures. The walls were alive with their movement, and there sat Bernard in the center of it all, his body covered in pulsing, overlapping boils. But what struck them most was his face - a maniacal, ecstatic grin stretched from ear to ear as he watched his own transformation with rapturous joy. "I'm blooming!" he screamed through his smile, "I'm finally blooming!"

As they watched in horror, the boils began bursting in waves, releasing swarms of insects that were larger and more vibrant than any they'd seen before. Bernard never stopped smiling, even as his flesh seemed to collapse inward, the insects erupting from every part of him. His final moments captured in that eternal, unsettling grin as his body emptied into a hollow shell of skin, like an empty cocoon. The insects burrowed into the walls and floor of the house, creating a maze of new sprouts that grew with unprecedented speed.

The remaining vines were burned down, and Bernard's house stands empty to this day. The insects disapeared come Spring and the vines withered. But sometimes, on particularly cold nights, people swear they can still see those shimmering insects buzzing behind the windows of the old house.

STOLEN COLOR

It began subtly, almost like a trick of the early autumn light, isolated to Willow Lane. Two houses stood side-by-side, homes to the Abernathy and Whitmore families. One day, the vibrant blue paint on the Abernathy's porch began to fade, turning a dull, dusty gray. The Abernathys, at first dismissive, soon found their lawn withering to ash, followed by Mrs. Abernathy's prized roses. Within days, the house became a monochrome shadow, and the family members developed an unsettling pallor, their hair taking on a silvery sheen.



The phenomenon crept next door. The Whitmore's cheerful yellow house succumbed to the same fate, color leaching away like watercolor in rain. The Whitmores became recluses, glimpsed only at twilight, their skin ashen, eyes hollow, their once-vibrant red hair bleached white as bone. The color loss spread like an invisible decay, consuming every hue in its path.

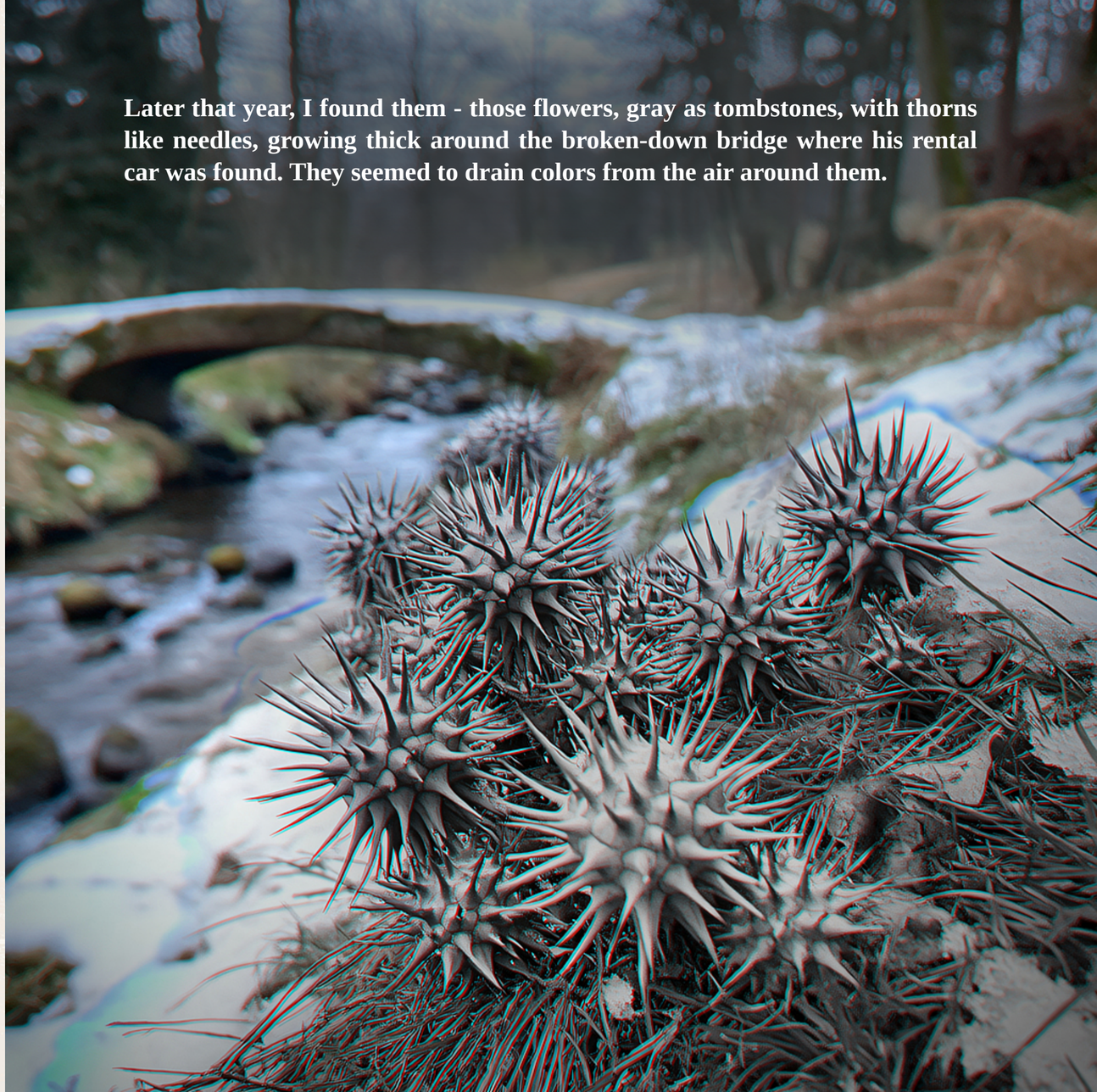
Rumors swirled through town in those early days. Whispers of an ancient curse, of a musty, metallic odor seeping from the Abernathy's cellar. Old Andrew, between sips from his flask, swore he saw a gray figure emerge from the forest and enter the Abernathy's house one night, just before it all began. The stranger never emerged.

When the police came investigating Mrs. Abernathy's ex-husband's disappearance, the case only deepened the mystery. He had returned from England, abandoned a rental car near Blackwood, and vanished. They suspected he was heading to his former home, but no trace was ever found.

The air around both houses grew thick and heavy, leaving visitors drained. The families became like ghosts, their voices dry whispers, their laughter echoing like dead leaves scraping concrete. They moved through their colorless world like living photographs from another era.

One bitter winter night, a figure was seen hauling a heavy plastic bag from the Abernathy's house into the forest, movements quick and furtive in the darkness. By morning, the grayness had lifted slightly, as if releasing its grip. The spreading stopped, and though the houses remained drained of color, the families slowly regained some vitality, as if awakening from a long nightmare.

But Martha's account chilled me most. She lived alone in a cottage near the bridge, and claimed to have encountered Abernathy's husband that fateful night. He stumbled past her, skin the color of cemetery ash, clutching his bleeding hand and muttering about strange flowers. She said his eyes already had that grayness to them, the same that would later consume both houses.



Later that year, I found them - those flowers, gray as tombstones, with thorns like needles, growing thick around the broken-down bridge where his rental car was found. They seemed to drain colors from the air around them.

SPIKES

The ice formations started appearing in late autumn, near the old logging trails. Not normal frost or icicles - these were different. Crystal-clear spikes that seemed to grow from tree bark and, sometimes, from animals that wandered too close. I saw a fox, its body partially encased in translucent spikes, eyes wide with panic visible through the crystalline surface. It thrashed wildly, trying to shake them off, but with each movement more ice formed until it stood frozen, a perfect sculpture of terror.



Most of the formations stayed contained to the northern part of Blackwood Forest, though some spread closer to town. People whispered about hunters who came back with frost-white fingers after touching the ice, their skin developing small, sharp protrusions like frozen thorns. They said it felt like being stabbed from the inside.

Shortly after Martha passed away from a heart attack that December, black vans appeared in town with a simple AV logo and no other markings. They parked near her empty cottage, and scientist-looking people in orange uniforms setup a base of operations in her house. They were always working in pairs, taking measurements in the forest, flying drones over the ice formations. Someone recognized the logo on their vans - Aether Void Corporation. They were government contractors, engineers testing atmospheric monitoring equipment. While professional, they kept technical details to themselves, but Sheriff Smith confirmed their paperwork was in order. I saw some of what they were hauling into that cottage - industrial-looking cases, strange machinery that hummed even when powered down. At night, blue lights pulsed behind the curtained windows.

Barely a week into their operation, one of their team members was rushed out in an ambulance. Witnesses said he was covered in those same ice formations, the crystals spreading across his hazmat suit. The paramedics’ gloves stuck to his skin when they tried to help him. After that, they worked frantically setting up equipment all around the forest, and suddenly the ice formations began to recede, breaking apart and melting away, even in the depths of winter.

Some claimed A-VOID had found a way to control or destroy the formations with a special sonic pulse - they said you could hear its hum if you listened closely at dawn, a deep vibration that made your teeth ache. Others insisted it was just natural thaw. But the timing seemed too convenient. And sometimes, on the coldest nights, I swear I can still hear that hum.





SPRING

Spring came to Blackwood this year with a strange kind of reluctance. The snow finally melted, revealing the tired earth, and I found myself, as one does, doing a bit of spring cleaning in the old house. It's a habit I picked up from my adoptive father, I think. He was always fussing over things.
Tucked away in a dusty box in the attic, amongst grandfather's old maps and journals, I found a photograph that caught my eye. It was yellowed at the edges but clear in the center - a woman standing in the doorway of this very house, wearing a dress in a shade of deep, almost luminous blue. On the back, scrawled in faded ink: "Sarah, May 1978." Something about her face was hauntingly familiar. When I checked the family bible and found old letters tucked inside, I discovered she was my mother. She had left when I was four, just after my father died.

It was then I realized - the woman in the blue dress from the puddle reflection had been her all along.

Just before the last snow melted, Aether Void researchers appeared at my door with their strange equipment. They seemed particularly interested in my family's connection to the property, but I couldn't tell them much - I'd lived with my adoptive parents most of my life, inheriting this place only after my grandfather's death.

Since then their drones sometimes hovered over the house at night, their soft hum mixing with the wind through the trees. It was then that I started to wonder how my family might have been mixed in all this.



THE SPIDER

Sometimes good things came out of the Shimmer, or at least funny ones. Like what happened at old Joe Miller's farm when he found one of those Aether Void robots wandering around his property one morning. It was this spindly thing, about the size of a large dog, with six legs and all sorts of blinking sensors. Must've gotten separated from whatever team was operating it in the forest.

Instead of reporting it, Joe got this idea in his head. See, he'd been having trouble with his irrigation system, and this robot thing seemed pretty good at climbing over rough terrain. So he somehow managed to wrangle it into his barn, spray-painted over the AV logo, and started using it to carry tools and parts around his farm.

For about two weeks, you could see this robot spider trudging around his property, carrying wrenches and pipes, with Joe walking behind it looking mighty pleased with himself. He'd rigged up some kind of remote control using his kid's old RC car controller. The thing would sometimes stop and try to take soil samples from his tomato patches, but Joe just called that a bonus - "free soil testing," he'd say with a wink.

It all ended when two A-VOID techs showed up at his door, looking mighty confused about why their missing research unit was showing up on their trackers in the middle of a tomato field. Joe tried to argue it was just a fancy tractor attachment he'd bought at auction, but the blinking A-VOID serial number under the paint gave him away.

One of the techs couldn't stop laughing when he saw the robot dutifully carrying a watering can across the field with a stetson on its head. It was a $2 million piece of equipment designed to study anomalous phenomena, and Joe had turned it into a farmhand.



THE REFLECTORS

The black dot hung in the air, still at the same place I found it the first time, a stark punctuation mark against the pale sky, where the last grip of winter was slowly giving way to spring. It seemed larger now, a more insistent void. I circled it cautiously, my boots sinking into the damp earth. It was here, near the unsettling presence of the dot, that I noticed them again – the reflectors.

They were always part of the forest, scattered throughout like forgotten relics. Large lenses, some the size of dinner plates, others like antique windows. Mirrors too, framed in thick, weathered wood, half-buried in the undergrowth or leaning against ancient trees. I'd dismissed them as junk, abandoned remnants of old structures, perhaps, or some eccentric's long-forgotten project.

But standing near the black dot, I saw what I'd missed before. As I brushed away layers of decaying leaves, a pattern emerged. The lenses and mirrors formed a complex network stretching out from the dot's location, each piece angled with precise purpose. Some were broken, their wooden frames rotting, shards of glass scattered on the forest floor. Others remained intact, still performing their silent, enigmatic function.

Then I remembered the diagrams I'd found in my grandfather's study - intricate designs filled with circles and lines, a language of angles and reflections. Standing among these forgotten lenses, I finally understood. They were blueprints for this network. Whatever my grandfather tried to do here in Blackwood, that growing black dot suggests he succeeded. And I started to wonder if my grandfather was trying to glimpse into another world through these lenses, or if he knew something was already seeping through and was desperately trying to seal it away.



THE HYMN

The old church by Miller’s Lake had been abandoned for decades, its stone walls slowly being reclaimed by moss and ivy. But this spring, as the ice melted, people started hearing strange sounds drifting across the water - discordant notes from the ancient organ rising through broken windows, chaotic and unsettling.

The sounds always started at sunset. Random tones that seemed to ripple across the lake’s surface, drawing people to stand at the water’s edge and listen. Some claimed they could hear patterns in the chaos - melodies that reminded them of half-forgotten lullabies, while others heard only wind going through pipes. But something about those sounds kept pulling people back.

As the days grew longer, the music changed. The notes became liquid, somehow, as if the organ pipes were filling with lake water. People who listened too long said they could feel it in their throats - a heaviness, like drowning in air. Birds stopped flying over the church. One morning, hikers found a family of rabbits on the path to the church, their fur soaked through, their lungs full of water despite being nowhere near the lake.

The Wilsons were the first to show symptoms. The elderly couple still came to pray in the church ruins every Sunday. They were found gasping for air near the altar, their clothes completely dry but their lungs filled with water. Then the first death occured. Sarah Henderson’s mother found the girl one morning, soaked through in her bed, water dripping from the mattress onto the floor. The sixteen-year-old had apparently drowned in her sleep, her lungs full of water. The police suspected foul play - that someone had drowned her and brought her body back to her bed. The investigation revealed she had spent the previous day at the church after a painful breakup with her boyfriend. He was briefly arrested as a suspect but quickly cleared when it became clear he had been out of town.

The same week two A-VOID vans appeared at the church. Their teams worked through the night, methodically dismantling the organ. People watched as they carefully loaded the pipes into sealed containers and drove them out of town.

The strange music have stopped. Sometimes the wind whistles through the empty church, but it’s just wind now, nothing more. Sarah Henderson’s case remains officially unsolved, filed away with all the other unexplained incidents that occurred during the Shimmer.



THE PIT

A seemingly bottomless sinkhole appeared in the middle of Blackwood Forest after a spring rainstorm. It was perfectly circular and emitted a faint, low-frequency hum. No one could see its bottom, even with powerful flashlights. But its most unsettling feature was its effect on memory - objects dropped into the pit weren't just lost to sight, they were gradually erased from the minds of everyone who knew about them.

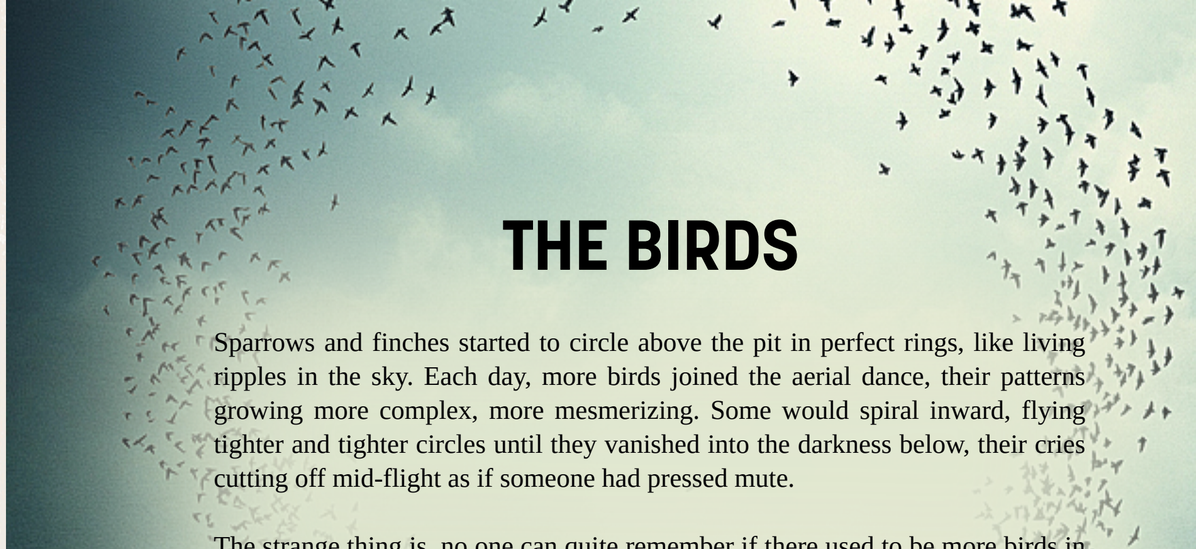
The sinkhole appeared after those heavy spring rains - a perfect circle in the forest floor, humming softly like a distant engine. Some said it had no bottom, others swore they could see strange lights deep within. But everyone agreed about one thing: whatever went into that pit didn't just disappear, it was forgotten.

I first heard about it from Mason's regulars. They were arguing about Bill Henderson throwing something valuable in there, but none of them could remember what it was. Mrs. Henderson later told me it was their grandfather clock - though she only knew that because she found the repair receipt. When I asked Bill about it, he just shrugged. "I hated that damn clock so I got rid of it. I think. Can't really remember anymore."

People started using it like a dump site, tossing in broken furniture and rusty appliances. Each item slipped from memory as easily as it slipped into the darkness. But the story that haunts me most came from Sarah Miller, who lives next door to the Martinez family.

She said she woke one morning to the sound of crying. Through her kitchen window, she could see the whole Martinez family in tears, though they couldn't explain why. Their youngest daughter kept setting an extra plate at dinner, and Mrs. Martinez would fold clothes for someone who wasn't there. It wasn't until Sarah helped them clean their attic that they found the family photos - all showing a teenage boy no one could remember.

Some say he jumped into the pit. Others insist he just moved away. But if you visit the Martinez house now, you'll notice the way they pause sometimes, like they're waiting for someone to fill a silence. They still buy groceries for five, though they're a family of four, and Mr. Martinez keeps a baseball mitt on the shelf, its leather worn by hands he can't remember.



THE BIRDS

Sparrows and finches started to circle above the pit in perfect rings, like living ripples in the sky. Each day, more birds joined the aerial dance, their patterns growing more complex, more mesmerizing. Some would spiral inward, flying tighter and tighter circles until they vanished into the darkness below, their cries cutting off mid-flight as if someone had pressed mute.

The strange thing is, no one can quite remember if there used to be more birds in Blackwood. At Mason’s Diner, old-timers argue about the massive flocks that once filled the trees, but their memories seem to shift and blur, like trying to recall a dream upon waking.

In June, Aether Void’s team installed a circular device near the pit. They called it a “frequency canceler,” and the humming that had drawn the birds have stopped. The aerial patterns disbanded, leaving the sky strangely empty. Now when I look up at the bare branches, I catch myself waiting for something - a movement, a song, a memory just out of reach.

The pit remains, a perfect dark circle in the forest floor. Children still throw stones into its depths, but at least they remember doing so now. There are times when I wonder what else we've forgotten, what memories have been swallowed by that perfect dark circle in the forest floor.



THE DIVIDE

We called it The Divide, though you won't find that name on any map. It wasn't marked by any fence or sign, just a subtle shift in the air, a stillness that felt both inviting and deeply wrong. It lay at the heart of a meadow deep in Blackwood, where the trees gave way to tall grasses and wildflowers. From a distance, it looked idyllic, a place of perfect symmetry.

Everything on the left side of the meadow was mirrored on the right. Flowers, trees, even the rippling patterns in the grass – all duplicated with an unsettling precision. But the right side was… off. The colors were faded, the flowers wilted.

And the silence. The left side of the meadow buzzed with the sounds of life – bees droning, crickets chirping, the rustle of small animals in the undergrowth. The right side was eerily quiet, like a held breath. Even the wind seemed to avoid it, leaving the gray grasses undisturbed.

They said if you stood at the exact center of The Divide for too long, a reflection of yourself would begin to appear on the right side. Not a perfect mirror image, but a faded, hollow version. Its movements would mimic yours, but always a beat behind, like a delayed echo. The longer you stayed, the more solid your counterpart became, until it was no longer just a reflection, but a separate entity, staring back at you with empty eyes from that silent, lifeless world.

HOLOFLOWERS

The holoflowers grow behind Miller's farm, just where the forest begins to thicken. They shimmer like holograms against the dark soil, their pale red and blue petals flickering in and out of existence. You can walk right through them - there's nothing to touch, just a sudden chill and a strange buzzing sound as you pass through.





THE CROSSING

The old footbridge over Miller's Creek started warping last spring. Not from age or weather - the wooden planks would twist and ripple like they were made of water, especially on moonless nights. The reflections in the creek below stopped matching what was above, showing a bridge that bent in impossible ways.

Local kids started calling it the Fun House Bridge, daring each other to cross it after dark. But then Robbie Parker tried to film it on his phone. In the video, the bridge seemed to fold in on itself, creating shapes that hurt to look at. When he played it back, the image bled into reality, distorting the air around his phone until the screen glass cracked.

The Henderson boys ignored the warnings and tried crossing one night. They made it to the other side, but something was off about them afterward. Their faces seemed slightly asymmetrical, fingers too long on one hand, too short on the other. They claimed they could still feel the bridge's twisting in their bones. The younger one can't look in mirrors anymore without getting dizzy.

The bridge sits abandoned now, its warped boards flowing like liquid wood. The creek beneath it runs backwards some days. Aether Void posted warning signs, but they keep twisting themselves into spirals overnight. Some say if you stand there long enough, you can feel the space around you starting to bend, like reality itself is learning new shapes.



THE METLED CAR

Everyone knows about that old Honda Civic rotting at the end of Cedar Lane. Been there since last summer. At first, it was just another junker abandoned in the woods - faded blue paint, broken taillight, nothing special. Then the mushrooms came.

The mushrooms started growin over the trunk, black fungi spreading outward like frozen waves. The metal seemed to soften around them, running like wax in places. Dark tendrils crept through the engine block, wrapped around the steering wheel, pulsed behind the cracked windows.

Sheriff Mills finally got around to checking it out after Mrs. Henderson complained about the smell. The plates led them to Jack Murray, who'd gone missing the same week his girlfriend Lisa vanished. When they popped the trunk, they found what was left of her - not much more than bones by then, threaded through with that same black growth.

They found Jack two days later in his garage, slumped over his workbench. The fungus had already claimed most of him, the same strange black growth spreading across his tools and up the walls. His confession was there too, written on a piece of paper now half-consumed by decay: "I'm sorry. It followed me home."

The fungi spread faster after that. The car looks half-melted now, more organic than metal, like something dying in slow motion. They say if you get close enough, you can hear a soft humming from deep within the growth. Aether Void wanted to haul it away for study, but the attempt ended in disaster. The moment their tow truck's winch cables touched the Civic, the black fungus surged, spreading across the metal like a stain. The cables themselves began to crumble, dissolving into black dust before they could even get a proper grip. Two agents barely escaped with their lives, their protective gear showing signs of rapid decay where it came into contact with the spores. Now, even Aether Void keeps its distance.

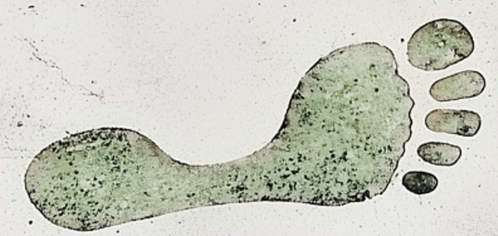
The case is closed, but that old Civic still sits there, slowly dissolving into the earth. Sometimes, late at night, its headlights flicker weakly through their fungal veils, as if something inside is still trying to signal for help.

THE STEPS

Dr. Patterson from the community college thought she could study the black fungi growing on that old Civic. Said she'd never seen anything like their molecular structure. She took samples, kept them in sealed jars in her lab.

A week later, her colleagues found the lab empty, the samples gone. All that remained were dark footprints leading from the broken jars to the door - each step a blooming patch of that same strange fungi. The trail continued outside, across the parking lot, then disappeared into the woods.





THE GARDEN ABOVE

The Wilsons never went up to their attic until the water damage appeared on their second-floor ceiling. When Mr. Wilson finally climbed those narrow stairs, he found something impossible.

A tiny forest had taken root in the dusty space, with trees no taller than a chair sprouting from the floorboards. Rainwater trickled through a small hole in the roof, forming a stream that wound between the miniature trunks before disappearing into a crack in the corner. Moss carpeted the rafters, and tiny ferns unfurled in the beam of his flashlight.

The contractor they called refused to give them an estimate, just stood there watching carpenter ants march like giants through the diminutive woodland. Mr. Wilson started spending his evenings up there, watching the way morning glory vines, small as threads, would climb up the water pipe in real time.

They never fixed the leak. Mrs. Wilson says the sound of that tiny stream helps her sleep at night, and sometimes, when the sun hits the attic window just right, the whole room fills with the smell of a forest after rain.

I've seen it myself. It's like looking down at a forest from an airplane, except you can reach out and touch the canopy with your fingertip. The Wilsons keep it secret now - they say with Aether Void sniffing around, they're not taking any chances. Sometimes, on quiet evenings, if you happen to be looking up at their house, you might see a faint, warm glow from the attic window, a subtle hint of the magic hidden within.





SUMMER

The heat came early that year, thick and oppressive, turning Blackwood's shadows into pools of liquid dark. I found myself returning to that spot deep in the forest where the black dot hung in the air. It had grown larger since winter, no longer just a point but a spreading darkness that seemed to pulse with its own rhythm.

I began adjusting my grandfather's lenses and mirrors scattered through the woods, drawn by some inexplicable compulsion to align them differently. When sunlight struck their surfaces, it fractured into rainbow shards that hung in the air longer than they should. Strange reflections would bounce between them, creating patterns that seemed to pierce through the fabric of reality itself. Sometimes these refractions would dance through the forest like signals, as if the light itself was trying to communicate with something beyond our world.

Standing there among these artifacts, watching this dance of impossible light, I began to understand what my grandfather might have been attempting. He wasn't just studying the phenomena - he was trying to peer through the cracks between worlds, to glimpse whatever lurked behind the thin veneer of our reality.

THE HOPSCOTCH BOG

Behind Mason's Creek, where the ground never quite dries, there's a patch of mud and standing water that the local kids call the Hopscotch Bog. It's nothing special at first glance - just scattered puddles of murky water. But on certain days, if you're careful and patient, those puddles connect in impossible ways.

Jenny Cooper found it by accident, reaching into a puddle for her dropped hair tie. Instead of finding it, she saw her own hand waving back at her from a pool fifteen feet away, where her twin Sarah was playing. After that, the neighborhood kids couldn't resist experimenting - nudging ping-pong balls in to see where they'd surface, putting sticks through one puddle and racing to pull them out from another, playing catch through portals of muddy water.

They made a game of it, like a weird mix of tag and hide-and-seek. One kid would stick their hand through, and others had to guess which puddle it would appear from. But the magic is delicate. Billy Matthews got too excited once, tried to jump through headfirst. The puddles just turned back to regular mud, splashing him from head to toe. The portals wouldn't work again for almost a week after that.

Since then they've become more careful - nothing bigger than an arm or leg, and always waiting between tries. They kept it secret from their parents. It was their own little miracle, these muddy windows that opened into each other. I wonder what it really meant to reach through those gaps in reality, to push your hand through one point in space and have it emerge in another. What else might have been luking in the spaces in between? Old Mrs. Henderson, who lived nearby, told me she sometimes saw strange beetles emerge from the puddles at dusk - iridescent things that would skitter between the pools until sunrise, when they'd slip back into the water and vanish.



THE DEBT

The Miller case rocked our small town that summer. Jake Miller had borrowed heavily from his childhood friend, Tom Hayes - gambling debts mostly. When Hayes disappeared in April, most assumed he'd left town to avoid his own creditors. That changed the morning Sarah Wilson opened Mason's Diner and found Hayes standing motionless in the parking lot.

He looked almost normal at first glance, until you noticed how half his face was covered in a strange, leaf-like growth that seemed to pulse gently with his breathing. His movements were slow, deliberate, and where his sleeve had torn, you could see his right arm was missing skin, replaced by a complex network of thin branches that somehow moved like muscle and bone.

The police found an empty grave deep in Blackwood, Miller's bloody hunting knife tangled in strange, iridescent roots that seemed to glow faintly in the beam of their flashlights. Miller confessed that day. Said he snapped when Hayes came to collect, stabbed him. Convinced that Hayes was dead, he decided to bury him in the woods.

Hayes still lives in town, in that small house at the end of Cedar Lane. He spends most days sitting on his porch, watching the street with unfocused eyes. When he speaks, which is rare, his words come out slow and disconnected, like someone trying to remember a language they've mostly forgotten.

The neighborhood kids used to make up stories about him, but these days they just wave when they pass his house. He acknowledges them with a slow nod, and no one mentions the small green leaves that have started growing along his hairline, which he seems to have accepted as just another part of himself.



THE MERGE

Malcolm Sullivan and Joey White discovered it during one of their weekend wanderings - a spot near Jensen's pond where reality felt thin. Stand in the right place long enough, and you could walk through solid objects like they were made of smoke. They kept it secret for weeks, practicing with tree trunks and fence posts before working up the courage to try walking through walls.

"It's like becoming a ghost," Joey told me over coffee at Mason's, his eyes bright with excitement. He knew I was writing the book. "Time it right, and you can step through anything." I warned him to be careful, but you know how teenagers are. They treated it like a game.

That changed the night they decided to explore the abandoned building near the supermarket. Something went wrong - Joey said Malcolm hesitated for too long and run out of power in the middle of the wall and got fused with it. The surgeons worked for hours, but the stone had become part of him, or he had become part of it - it was impossible to tell where Malcolm ended and the wall began. They managed to free most of him, but the damage was done. He died three days later in the hospital.

Joey still visits the ruins sometimes. He says if you press your ear against the right section of wall, you can hear Malcolm's voice vibrating through the stone. I went with him once. The wall was warm to the touch, thrumming with a gentle pulse that felt almost like a heartbeat. When Joey spoke, something in the stones shifted in response, creating patterns of sound that seemed almost like words. Joey insisted Malcolm is still in there somewhere, conscious and aware, his mind spread through the old walls like roots through soil.

Last week, they found Joey's jacket by the ruins, covered in a fine layer of granite dust. No one's seen him since. But people walking near Jensen's pond at night say they can hear two voices now, whispering through the stones in perfect harmony.



THE TWINS

What happened to Sarah Miller’s cat shone some light on where the glass creatures in the forest come from. The orange tabby had been acting strange for weeks after pawing at some translucent plants near the woods that looked almost like coral. At first, the changes were subtle. The cat’s fur developed an odd sheen, like dewdrops caught in morning light.

Sarah found it one morning in the garden, perfectly still, its skin translucent in patches. Through these clear windows, you could see something taking shape inside - delicate structures growing along its bones. The cat seemed distressed but not in pain as glassy shapes emerged through its fur. These fragments would break free and slither nearby, slowly arranging themselves into a perfect translucent replica of the cat. The original cat recovered completely and the glass copy followed it around for weeks before wandering into the forest to join others of its kind. The process needed three elements: the strange plants, a living vessel, and time. Each new glass creature would eventually shatter, its pieces sinking into the soil to sprout new growths, continuing the cycle.

The Collins family learned this the hard way. Their daughter Emily, who had been struggling with depression since her mother’s death, came home one day with that telltale sheen to her skin. Within a week, there were two of her - one flesh, one glass. The glass Emily never spoke, but her presence seemed to comfort the real Emily. For the first time in months, Emily started smiling again, spending hours with her silent companion.

But like all glass creatures, her double was drawn to the forest. One morning, Emily’s father saw the glass girl standing at the forest’s edge, motionless as a statue. Emily ran after her transparent twin as it glided between the trees. They searched for days, but found no trace of either Emily - just her favorite silver earring lying in a patch of grass near the old creek.

Some say on quiet nights, you can see two figures dancing between the trees, one solid, one transparent, moving in perfect silence through the darkened forest.



AMALGAMATION

I found the photograph in July, tucked between the pages of my grandfather's unintelligible notes while gathering research for this book. It showed a teenage boy with dark hair and a familiar half-smile that made my blood run cold. There was something about that face - a nagging familiarity that I couldn't quite place, like a word stuck on the tip of my tongue.

It wasn't until I was reviewing the Martinez family photos for another chapter that it hit me. The boy in my grandfather's papers was identical to their missing son, the one everyone had forgotten after he fell in the pit. I laid the photos side by side, my hands trembling. The same eyes, the same smile, even the same small scar above his left eyebrow.

I spent days in the library archives after that discovery, pulling yearbooks from decades past. There he was again and again - my grandfather as a teenager in the 1950s, wearing the same face as the Martinez boy who had disappeared that spring. It wasn't just a resemblance; they were identical.

My grandfather was long dead when the Martinez boy vanished into the pit. But there they were - the same person existing in two different times, as if something had taken the erased boy and echoed him backwards through time, creating a ripple in reality that manifested as my grandfather.

I found more connections in my grandfather's journals. He wrote about dreams of a different family, of memories that didn't belong to him. "Sometimes I wake up calling for a mother I never had," one entry read. "I remember a house I've never lived in, a sister I never knew." The Martinez house. The sister who still sets an extra plate at dinner.

The pit hadn't just erased the boy from memory - it had somehow folded time around him, transplanting his existence into the past, creating my grandfather, who would eventually inherit this house and start experimenting in Blackwood, possibly causing the Shimmer.



MASSIVE

It was Marcus who first spotted it - just a massive shadow moving above the treeline at dusk, like a storm cloud with purpose. He'd been tracking Aether Void's movements through Blackwood that week, curious about their late-night operations. He'd pulled his black van off the old logging road to take a leak when the first tremor hit. The trees ahead swayed unnaturally, followed by a sound like thunder. Marcus turned to run but tripped over his own feet, face-planting into the dirt. As he scrambled up, spitting leaves, another crash echoed through the forest, closer this time. He didn't look back until he reached the road's bend, out of breath and covered in mud.

His van was crushed flat. Three massive claw marks had torn through the asphalt nearby, each deep enough to park a car in. The surrounding trees were snapped at odd angles, marking a path of destruction that led to a clearing half a mile away. Whatever made the tracks had simply vanished there, leaving only a circle of flattened forest as evidence of its passing.

In the weeks that followed, a few people reported strange sightings. Mrs. Cooper swore she saw something massive moving against the stars while letting her dog out at 3 AM. Old Joe at the gas station talked about hearing deep, rhythmic thuds one night that made his coffee cups rattle. Through the summer, there were occasional glimpses of movement above the trees, always at night, always too far away to make out clearly.



THE SLOW

The first crystal emerged near Jensen’s Pond, a jagged formation of translucent shards that seemed to pulse with an inner light. We didn’t understand its significance until Kate Miller got caught in its field while hiking.

From our perspective on the trail, she appeared frozen mid-stride, but looking closer, you could see her moving - impossibly, infinitely slow. A single step taking hours, a blink lasting days.

The zone extended in a perfect sphere around the crystal, about thirty feet in diameter. Anything entering that space would be caught in its temporal drag. Leaves would drift down like feathers in honey, birds hung suspended between wingbeats. Even sound moved differently there - Kate’s calls for help reached us as deep, stretched-out groans that took minutes to form single syllables.

Tom Reeves, her boyfriend, rushed in to help before anyone could stop him. He made it three steps into the sphere before the temporal drag caught him too. Now we had two people trapped, moving at a glacial pace, their faces locked in expressions of dawning horror as they realized what was happening.

Aether Void arrived within hours, equipped with what they called “temporal stabilization suits” - bulky orange hazmat gear that let them move normally through the affected area. They extracted both Kate and Tom safely, though from their perspective only seconds had passed. But those seconds aged the rest of us by days, our worried faces appearing to fast-forward through time as we watched the rescue.

Two more crystals appeared that summer - a smaller one in the park behind the elementary school, and another in Patterson’s cornfield. Each created its own bubble of slowed time, though not as powerful as the first. Aether Void fenced off all three sites with stark warning signs, but until the Shimmer ended you could still see birds caught in the spheres, hanging motionless between wingbeats, or insects frozen in mid-flight.





FLUID AIR

I was at Mason's Diner when it started. Just for a second, the air rippled like heat waves rising from summer asphalt, and every sound simply stopped. No clinking of coffee cups, no murmured conversations, no sizzle from the grill. Mrs. Henderson was mid-sentence complaining about her arthritis, her mouth still moving but no words coming out. Just that deep, almost subsonic vibration humming at the edge of hearing.

Then it passed, and sound rushed back like a held breath released. Given everything that had happened in Blackwood since the Shimmer began, most people just shrugged it off as another strange occurrence. But it happened again the next day, lasting three seconds this time. I watched through my kitchen window as a cardinal tried to sing, its beak opening and closing in perfect silence while the air wavered like water.

The pulses kept coming, each one longer than the last. Five seconds. Twenty seconds. A full minute of silence broken only by that low, pregnant thrum. During each wave, the air took on an almost gelatinous quality - you could wave your hand through it and watch the ripples spread outward like rings in a pond. Movement became difficult, like wading through invisible molasses. People caught in the waves would find themselves moving in slow motion, their limbs heavy and resistant.

The town split on how to react. The Hendersons and a few other families packed up and left, claiming this was the sign that the Shimmer was finally going to swallow Blackwood whole. Others, like old Joe at the gas station, insisted it was nothing compared to the glass creatures or the pit - just another oddity to adapt to. But what really caught my attention was Aether Void's response. More of their vans appeared each day, their teams setting up monitoring equipment all over town. I'd never seen them so excited, their usual clinical detachment replaced by an almost fevered energy.



THE ATTIC

I spent hours in my grandfather's attic that evening, surrounded by stacks of his research. When the pulse came again, the familiar silence fell, and the air turned thick and wavering. Through the distortion, I noticed movement by the window - a figure crouched over the floorboards, carefully placing something beneath them. My grandfather, but translucent, like a shadow given depth.

He stood up slowly, holding what looked like rolled-up diagrams, and then he saw me. His eyes widened in surprise, and for a moment we just stared at each other through that strange, liquid air. He opened his mouth as if to speak, took a half-step forward - and then the pulse ended, and I was alone again.

The loose floorboards were easy to find. Beneath them was a metal box, decades old but untouched, containing intricate designs for the lens network. As I studied the diagrams, I began to understand what my grandfather had been trying to build out there in the forest.



THE HARVEST

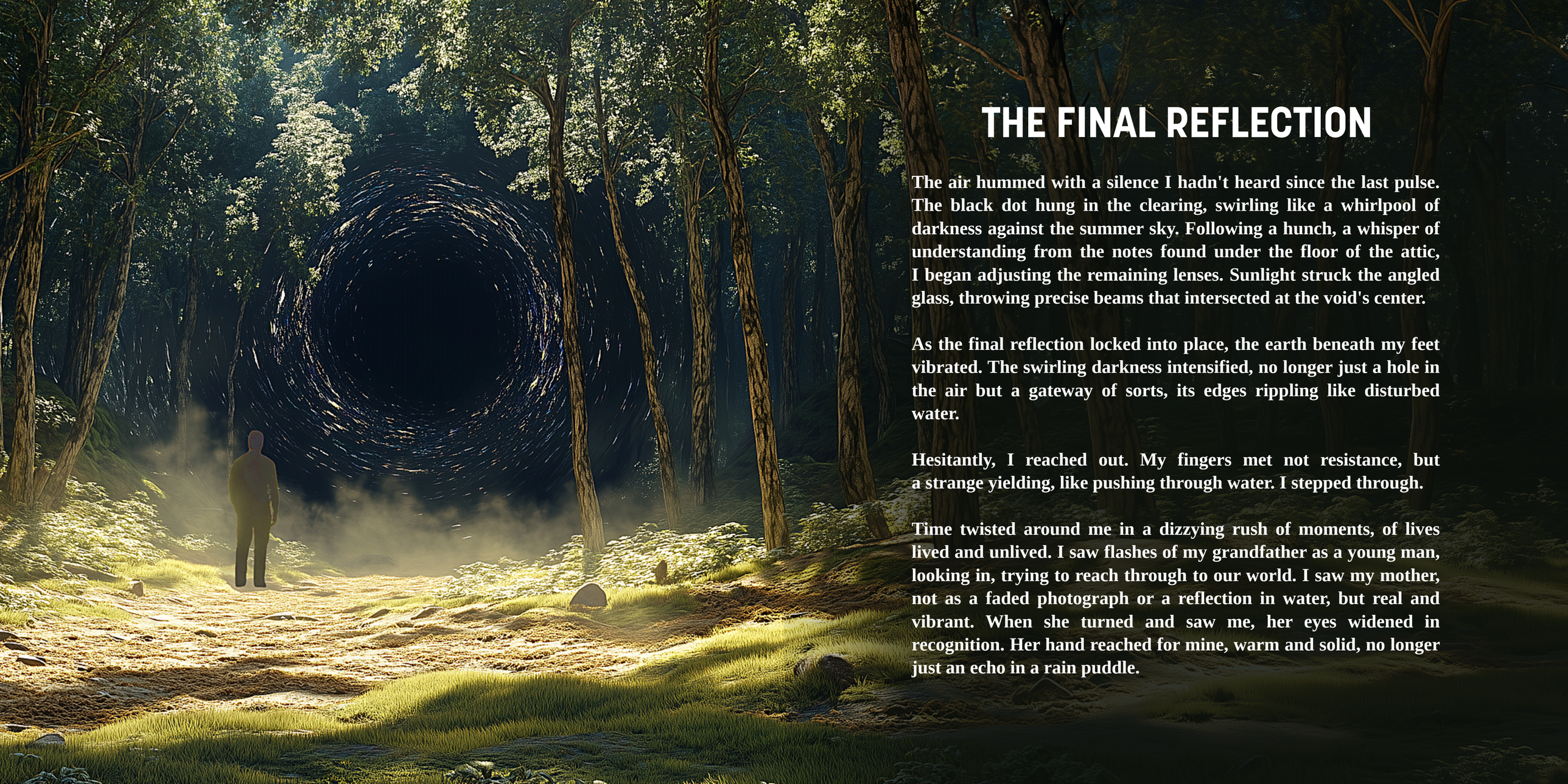
The orange tractor sat in Miller's lumber yard, John Thompson had operated it for years. The morning after one of the pulses, he noticed something is wrong. At first, he thought someone had vandalized the tractor overnight, welded strange attachments to the front. But these weren't metal - they were growing right out of the hood, four massive claws like the talons of some prehistoric bird, flexing and curling in the dawn light.

John kept his distance after that, watching the changes spread. The metal developed a strange, mottled texture, almost like bark or scales. The engine's rumble changed too, taking on an organic quality, like the purr of some massive beast.

He might have left it at that, just another strange occurrence in Blackwood, if he hadn't seen what it did to that deer. John was locking up the yard when he spotted the tractor moving on its own, those claws snapping out with impossible speed. The deer never had a chance. John watched in horror as the front of the tractor split open like a mouth, consuming the animal in seconds.

The tractor disappeared into Blackwood that night. Sometimes loggers glimpse it moving through the deeper parts of the forest - a dark shape with massive claws, metal and organic all at once. They say if you listen carefully on quiet nights, you can hear an engine's rumble mixed with something that sounds almost like chewing.

John avoided the forest after that, but something about the tractor seemed to call to him. They found his truck parked at the forest's edge one morning, empty except for a note: "I need to understand what it's become." No one's seen him since. But hikers occasionally report seeing headlights moving through the trees at night, and in their beam, the shadow of a man sitting in a cabin made of twisted metal and living wood, his hands fused to controls that pulse like veins.



THE FINAL REFLECTION

The air hummed with a silence I hadn't heard since the last pulse. The black dot hung in the clearing, swirling like a whirlpool of darkness against the summer sky. Following a hunch, a whisper of understanding from the notes found under the floor of the attic, I began adjusting the remaining lenses. Sunlight struck the angled glass, throwing precise beams that intersected at the void's center.

As the final reflection locked into place, the earth beneath my feet vibrated. The swirling darkness intensified, no longer just a hole in the air but a gateway of sorts, its edges rippling like disturbed water.

Hesitantly, I reached out. My fingers met not resistance, but a strange yielding, like pushing through water. I stepped through.

Time twisted around me in a dizzying rush of moments, of lives lived and unlived. I saw flashes of my grandfather as a young man, looking in, trying to reach through to our world. I saw my mother, not as a faded photograph or a reflection in water, but real and vibrant. When she turned and saw me, her eyes widened in recognition. Her hand reached for mine, warm and solid, no longer just an echo in a rain puddle.



And then, I understood. The missing, the changed, the impossible – they were glimpses of what could be, what might have been, what was happening somewhere else.

With a focused thought, a tightening of intent learned from those fleeting moments, I reached for the threads of time, the shimmering strands that connected these fractured realities. It was like pulling a tangled knot, each tug resonating through Blackwood. The disjointed melodies of the organ resolved into a single, clear note. The warped bridge straightened with a groan. The faded colors sharpened.

I found myself back in the clearing. The swirling darkness was gone. The air felt... normal. The oppressive weight of the Shimmer had lifted. But Blackwood was subtly different. The old oak tree in the town square was now a maple, its branches reaching in unfamiliar patterns. The church spire had always pointed north, hadn't it? Not west. And wasn't Henderson's Grocery supposed to be on Pine Street, not where the library should have been? Miller's Lake was now Cooper's Pond, though everyone acted like it had always been called that. Walking into what I remembered as Mason's Diner, I found myself in White's Coffee Shop instead, though the layout inside was exactly the same.

Later that evening, I found her sitting on the porch. My mother. Older, lines around her eyes that weren't there in the photograph, but her smile was the same. She looked up, and simply said, "Thomas. You're back."



We didn't speak of the Shimmer. There was an understanding, unspoken, a shared knowledge of fractured timelines and echoes in time. She told me stories of her life, a life that felt both intimately familiar and strangely foreign. Details were warped, events shifted, reasons altered. It was like listening to a half-remembered dream. The few memories I had of her, from when I was four, were fragile, fragmented things, like pieces of a broken mirror.

Then she spoke of my father, and a cold unease settled in my chest. Not the father I knew, the one lost to cancer years after she vanished, but a different version, from a timeline where she never disappeared into Blackwood, where they had stayed together, built a life. A life where I... didn't exist. She spoke his name with a soft sigh, a ghost of a smile touching her lips. Then her smile faded. "He's gone now, too," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "He became ill. It was quick." A shared loss, a parallel pain, echoing across fractured realities. It seemed that in any timeline, my father was destined to leave too soon. But then her gaze sharpened, focusing on something beyond my shoulder, and she whispered, almost to herself, "Unless... there's another one. Another timeline, another version." But some doors, once glimpsed, are best left unopened, and we both knew, without saying a word, that this was one of them.

The book you hold is a record of the Shimmer, as I experienced it. But now, as I reread these accounts, a chilling realization settles in. Did I truly end it, or merely shift it elsewhere? Is there another Blackwood out there, still caught in its grip? The changes remain woven into our reality, and perhaps the most terrifying thing isn't the impossible events themselves, but the way the world adapts, the way our memories shift to accommodate the extraordinary, until the unbelievable becomes just... history.

And I wonder, as I sit here with my mother, in this house filled with the ghosts of might-have-beens, what other echoes linger in the quiet corners of Blackwood, waiting to be discovered?

Thomas Lore

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